

## Chapter 10

### The North and Europe in *24 Hour Party People* and *Control*

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In this chapter we discuss representation of the North in two films, *24 Hour Party People* (2002) by Michael Winterbottom and *Control* (2007) by Anton Corbijn. Each of them is a fictionalised biography of a famous person, who left his mark on popular music in the North of England. Europe played a major role in the lives of both of these men. *24 Hour Party People* casts as the main character the music promoter and media personality, Tony Wilson (1950-2007), known as ‘Mr Manchester’ due to his effort to build in his city a music industry independent from London. *Control* is about Ian Curtis (1956-1980), the lead singer of Joy Division, one of the most revered indie rock bands originating in the North of England, which was signed to Wilson’s record label, Factory Records. Our intention is to assess the meaning of Europe for these men, as it is presented in the respective films. Let’s begin, however, with presenting briefly the connection between Manchester and Europe.

#### Manchester and Europe

When we think about large European cities, particularly capital cities, such as London, Paris, Rome and Vienna, we almost automatically regard them as cosmopolitan. This is not surprising as they are amongst the most visited places in the world as well as being cultural centres, with artists from all over the world going to them in search of inspiration and contact with like-minded people. American writers and intellectuals such as Ernest Hemingway visited Paris in the 1920s, and London of the 1960s was a magnet for European film directors, such as Michelangelo Antonioni, Roman Polanski and Jean-Luc Godard. Much less is known about the cosmopolitan character of smaller cities, such as Manchester. What we know is that the city became cosmopolitan during its heyday in the Industrial Revolution, when it attracted many people from Europe, searching for work or investment opportunities in the textile industry. A proportion of them came to avoid persecution at home. The largest was the German minority and among them Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels became the most famous. Engels came to Manchester in 1842 to work at the headquarters of the family firm of Ermen & Engels. His father sent the young man to Manchester in part to rid him of his radically socialist views, but instead Friedrich became more committed to the cause of the working class. By day Engels worked as a cotton merchant; by night he scoured the slum streets near Oxford Road station,

to find material for his *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, published in 1844. Engels lived in Manchester on and off for almost 30 years and Marx came to visit him on a number of occasions.

As Jonathan Westaway observes in relation to Manchester of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, up to the First World War, the German commercial community transformed the cultural and intellectual life of the city. German industrialists and merchants brought with them the aspirations of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, the educated middle class of the German states, and they became key players in the formation of cultural institutions in Manchester. In so doing, they created a distinctive regional middle-class culture, different from its London counterpart. The liberal and nonconformist middle classes of Manchester warmed to German culture and sympathised with the struggles of liberals, reformers and progressives in Germany. The provincial elite of Manchester saw in those struggles a mirror of their own struggle for regional autonomy against an over-centralising state. If the defining characteristic of their sense of Englishness was a love of liberty, this was not, they believed, an exclusively national attribute, but one which the regional middle class felt they shared with a larger Teutonic family of nations. They aspired to emulate the high levels of German cultural capital as they understood it: they read, debated, struggled with and cherished German ideas, language and literature, and they adopted German institutional models (Westaway 2009). The German community had a civilising influence on Manchester. Consequently, Manchester was a place where global, rather than national ideas were born, as epitomised by Marxist socialism and the cooperative movement.

Continental Europeans and especially Germans had also a major impact on music in nineteenth-century Manchester, in part reflecting a widespread opinion that ‘the English are the only cultured nation without its own music’ (on this argument and its criticism see Morra 2014: 1-30). As Neville Cardus puts it, ‘The City has paid tribute to Saint Cecilia in language possessing the Teuton accent’ (Cardus 1974: 176). ‘Great music was brought to the City by the Germans; by an accident of commercial development men journeyed to Manchester to earn their livings, and they hailed from a country where getting and spending is as important a job as ever it was in Lancashire county, yet not to be pursued for twenty-four hours of every day, unless good music is at hand to keep fresh the mind of the “tired businessman”’ (ibid.: 177). Of the Germans who put their stamp on music in Manchester best known is Karl Halle (1819 – 1895), later known as Charles Hallé, whose orchestra, set up in Manchester in 1867 to accompany the Arts Treasures Exhibition, became the most important music institution in Manchester and in the whole of Britain. Cardus describes Halle as the ‘informing genius of

“musical Manchester” (ibid.: 178). There were other Germans involved in music during the Victorian period, such as Hans Richter, Willy Hess and Max Meyer, who not only brought music to Manchester, but connected the city to music in Europe. This was because in their repertoire were works of famous continental composers such as Richard Strauss and during the peak of its success visitors from abroad came to Manchester especially to listen to the city’s music. Significantly, however, prefiguring the fate of one of the protagonists of this chapter, Tony Wilson, Cardus observes that the artistic successes of the Hallé Orchestra were not accompanied by financial success (ibid.: 182).

After the Second World War, following a decline in manufacturing, the fortune of Manchester changed for the worse. As David Haslam puts it, ‘twentieth-century changes have created a sense that the city and its people have been deserted and abandoned, like the uneconomic ruins of another era... its heart was emptied, its reason for living unclear’ (Haslam 1999: viii). This was reflected in the state of the city’s buildings. By the 1970s Manchester was known for dilapidated housing estates, the empty shells of factories and a high level of crime. It was a city in ruins, feeding on its past, not unlike Detroit after its car industry declined.

However, Manchester did not have a music scene on a par with Detroit. Although there were popular bands originating in this city and its surroundings, such as 10cc, the Hollies, Sad Café, even the Bee Gees, as well as a distinctive Northern Soul scene, active in Greater Manchester, the individual successes did not add up to constitute the sense of a thriving music industry or scene. There was a lack of animators of culture able to match the successes of the Germans in the nineteenth century. A similar situation was in other parts of the North of England. Those who were seeking success in popular music, usually headed to the South of England or to Europe, as was the case with the Beatles, who tried their luck in London, a journey represented in Richard Lester’s *The Hard Day’s Night* (1964), in which the band leaves Liverpool by train to appear on television. Moreover, till the 1960s local musicians used to sing with American accents. The prevailing narrative of music in Manchester is that this state of relative decline lasted till Tony Wilson entered the stage, so to speak. *24 Hour Party People* subscribes to and reinforces this narrative.

### Tony Wilson as an Honorary European in Manchester

Tony Wilson, the central character in *24 Hour Party People*, belongs to the lineage of Mancunians, known for being both fiercely local and cosmopolitan. In this context it is worth mentioning that Wilson’s maternal grandfather, Herman Maximillian Knupfer, was German

(Nolan 2010: 2), therefore he symbolically belongs to the community of Germans who tried to civilize Manchester and make it equal to, but different from London.<sup>i</sup> Wilson was also a self-proclaimed socialist, influenced by the ideology of Situationism, an international, albeit particularly popular in the Francophone countries, Marxist social and artistic movement, whose apex was in 1967-68. This happened when Wilson was a student at Cambridge University. He is quoted as saying:

I was at Cambridge with other would-be Situationists like Paul Sieveking [future writer for the *Sunday Telegraph*] and I was a member of a group called the Kim Philby Dining Club which I think had some people from the Angry Brigade involved. We all wanted to destroy the system but didn't know how. We knew about Strasbourg and the Situationist tactics of creative plagiarism and basing change on desire. The Situationists offered, I thought then and I still think now, the only future revolution I could imagine or want. (quoted in Hussey 2002: 214)

On completing his study in the early 1970s Wilson returned to the North and started working as a reporter for Granada Television. After attending a Sex Pistols concert at Manchester Lesser Free Trade Hall in 1976, he also started to build up a music scene in Manchester (Nice 2011: 7-8). Before that, as Haslam asserts, 'the notion of Manchester as a taste-making rock & roll town was unthinkable' (Haslam 1999: 110). Wilson achieved it by setting up both a record company, a club and surrounding himself with a group of like-minded people, keen to keep local music talent in Manchester. Wilson's ambitions were even greater than creating a music scene: he tried to reinvent the city by associating it with pop-rock, creativity and a particular brand of socialism: a Wilsonian version of Situationism. As James Nice puts it, he had 'faith in the romantic magic of Manchester' (Nice 2011: 12). His ultimate dream was to make Manchester matter again, both in England and internationally. *24 Hour Party People* draws on these various aspects of Wilson's identity: northern, cosmopolitan and socialist, showing how they rendered Wilson a local hero, but also pointing to the problems Wilson encountered, trying to fulfil his ambitions.

Michael Winterbottom was a natural choice for making a film about Wilson for at least three reasons. First, in common with his character, he also comes from Lancashire, being born in Blackburn. Second, music in some of his other films is not only a background to action, but also their subject or structural principle, as in *9 Songs* (2004), where the life of the main couple

is divided by and reflects the songs they listen to together. Thirdly, Winterbottom has a reputation for being a postmodernist, who rather than representing reality, prefers to uncover the mechanisms of its representation (Bennett 2014: 134-51). Making a film about an artist's life or production of an artefact is a perfect way to do so and *24 Hour Party People* was not Winterbottom's only attempt at creating a postmodern version of a biopic; since then he made *A Cock and Bull Story* (2005), which is a film about film industry, in the same way *24 Hour Party People* is a film about music industry.

That Winterbottom is more interested in the interplay between different representations of reality than establishing the factual truth is conveyed by the visual style of the film. Part of it is shot on a handheld camera, which makes us feel very close to the characters and, on the other hand, draws attention to the presence of the cameraman. In the episodes shot in the Hacienda the camera moves from one character to another in quick succession and colours are dazzling, so that it is difficult to establish whether what we see happened in reality or is a psychedelic vision. Nick Redfern summarises the film's style as 'punk' (Redfern 2005: 286). Xan Brooks in his review describes it in such terms: 'This rambunctious pop-art assemblage (shot in the same handheld, DV style the director employed on 1999's *Wonderland*) sets out to catch the essence of a scene that (as with possibly every youth trend in a mass media age) had myth built into it from day one' (Brooks 2002: 55-6).

The premiere of *24 Hour Party People* coincided with the publication of Wilson's book, *24 Hour Party People: What the Sleeve Notes Never Tell You* (2002), which is a hybrid of the script, Wilson's comments on Winterbottom's film and his thoughts about his own life in the context of a wider history of the North, which are of special interest to us. At the beginning of Chapter 2, entitled 'Granadaland', Wilson writes:

England's North-West, the background to our little tale, is a bit like that bit of semi-desert between the Tigris and the Euphrates in Iraq; a piece of land and a bunch of people that changed the world forever and then sank back into obscurity. In their aridity and poverty they seem to pay the price for ever daring to kick evolution's arse.... This was the land that gave us the modern world. This was the home of the Industrial Revolution, changing the habits of homo sapiens the way the agrarian revolution had done ten thousand years earlier. And what did the heritage mean? It meant slums. It meant shite. Burnt out by all that 'production'. Capital strides the globe and it walked out on this lot around the time Queen Victoria popped it.

The remnants, derelict working-class housing zones, empty redbrick mills and warehouses and a sense of self that it included loss and pride in equal if confused measures. (Wilson 2002: 14)

In this fragment Wilson engages with a particular discourse of the English North (and especially the North-West), marked by a mixture of pride in its achievements and a recognition that they came at a heavy price and were not sustained. This discourse overlaps with musing about the nature of capitalism. The paradox of the North West was that it was both made by capitalism and destroyed or at least weakened by it. Even at the peak of its industrial might, for the majority of northerners life was about hard work for little financial or cultural reward, as Engels observed in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. The profit from their labour went into the pockets of the capitalists, who often spent much of it away from the North. When the role of the industry declined, capital moved elsewhere and the North was discarded as a kind of industrial museum. The North is thus always betrayed by capitalism. At the same time, it has to live by its principles, because capitalism is a hegemonic system in Britain. If one does not have enough capital, one cannot invest in new enterprises or if one uses it unwisely, one's business will eventually collapse, which is Wilson's story in a nutshell. The logic of socialism (and its higher form, communism) is different. Under socialism certain objects and actions are valued not because they bring profit, but because of their social and cultural benefits. Not surprisingly, Wilson declared himself a socialist and he can be described as someone who tried to live a socialist life in the midst of a capitalist order. Moreover, he did so at the time when capitalism in Britain was shedding its 'socialist skin', taking a turn from Keynesianism, introduced in the UK after the end of the Second World War, toward its more extreme, neoliberal version. Perhaps what is most remarkable about Wilson is not that he failed, but that he managed to exist in his 'socialist bubble' for a considerable time.

In the same chapter, as its title suggests, the author refers to Granada Television, founded by Sidney Bernstein in 1954, which was also Wilson's workplace. Bernstein was a Southerner from Essex and, although Wilson does not explain the reason for naming the Manchester-based TV station 'Granada', it can be regarded as reflecting the relationship between the English South and the North, with southerners perceiving the North as semi-oriental. Such a conceptualization of the North as a colonial outpost of the South is also presented in *24 Hour Party People*, largely through Wilson's own words.

There are many signs in the film suggesting that Winterbottom is sympathetic towards his protagonist, such as choosing for the main role charismatic actor, Steve Coogan, famous

for playing Alan Partridge, and Shirley Henderson, one of the ‘coolest’ British actresses of her generation to play Wilson’s wife Lindsay. More importantly, perhaps, Winterbottom cast the real Tony Wilson in the role of the film’s director, as if he wanted to say that he identifies with the plight of his protagonist and sees him as a ‘director’ in charge of the whole show. Yet, Winterbottom avoids eulogizing Wilson. We are meant to like ‘Mr Manchester’ not because he has no vices but despite having them. Given that Wilson collaborated on the script, this might have been his intention as well, as vices rather than virtues make an interesting character or a price Wilson was prepared to pay to have a film dedicated to him.

Winterbottom and Wilson also reveal the same postmodern approach to history, believing that history is not a passive mirror of reality, but an active force. It is up to its actors to make reality historical by exaggerating the importance of certain events, twisting their meaning, seeing them in the context of events that happened elsewhere and immortalising them in the media. The strategy of a postmodern historian is thus similar to the strategy of a Situationist who creates situations rather than merely observing how they develop. However, the risk of adopting such a strategy is opening oneself to ridicule, as not all people and situations render themselves easily to ‘historicising’. This is a risk both Wilson and Winterbottom were prepared to take. In many episodes Wilson insists that he is doing something extra-important or that a person who he is friends with is breaking the mould. However, the way it is presented is often so unrealistic and funny that we are not sure whether the point is to depict Wilson as somebody extraordinary, an arrogant man with an inflated sense of self-importance or a joker, who tries to laugh off his misfortune. To quote Wilson, I will argue that the film, in a typically postmodern fashion, ‘works both ways’ or even more than two ways.<sup>ii</sup> The most extreme case is near the end of the film, when Wilson talks to God who looks like him and praises Wilson, which might be a reflection of Mr Manchester’s delusional sense of self-importance or a serious acknowledgement by Winterbottom that Wilson, like god, was a ‘man of vision’ and performed extraordinary deeds.

#### Figure 10.1

#### Tony Wilson hand-gliding over the Pennines

There is a certain method in the way Wilson presents himself, by comparing events in which he participated to those which took place earlier and usually in Europe, and whose importance is beyond doubt. It is the status of the comparator which is meant to ensure the significance of what happened to Wilson. In the first episode of the film, when the protagonist

is hang-gliding over the Pennines, for *Granada Reports* feature, his flight is accompanied by *The Ride of the Valkyries*, the theme from Richard Wagner's opera, *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*). As Bruce Bennett observes, the theme was used before in films such as *Birth of a Nation* by Griffith and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. These films added a sense of drama to this already dramatic piece of music, which was previously associated with German culture and even national psyche (Bennett 2014: 140). Using it as an accompaniment to Wilson's exploits furnishes his persona with ambiguity. One wonders whether Winterbottom chose Wagner's music as a soundtrack to add pathos to the journalist's exploits or to underline the absurdity of his position, which is confirmed when he crashes, injuring himself, although only slightly. The same happens when he says:

You are going to be seeing a lot more of that sort of thing in the film. Although that actually did happen, obviously it's symbolic. It works on both levels. I don't want to tell you too much. I don't want to spoil the film, but I'll just say 'Icarus'. If you know what I mean, great. If you don't, it doesn't matter; but you should probably read more.

The reference to a famous Greek myth might suggest that Wilson feels like a descendant of Icarus or that he wants to underline a disparity between the myth and his position as an exploited employee of Granada. To metaphorically lift himself up, Wilson finds a reference point outside his immediate reality, outside his time and the UK, in continental Europe of antiquity, which created stories of universal appeal. In this way, he marks himself as different from the people who surround him, because they say how things are, rather than how they are in comparison with another reality. Usually they simply say that things are wrong with Manchester. At the same time they do not reveal any ambition to change them. There is a certain defiance about them, marked by using Manchester as their sole vantage point. This can stem from their ignorance (neither character in the film appears to be as educated or sophisticated as Wilson), but also from a northern pride in being reconciled with one's position in the world.<sup>iii</sup>

Later Wilson, when walking in the building which is to become his music club, the Hacienda, muses about the way buildings change people, including the way they think. He mentions Renaissance Florence, to which his interlocutor replies 'This is not Renaissance Florence, this is Dark Ages Manchester. It's like a fucking abattoir.' When some time later the Hacienda is flourishing, Wilson says that he was right – Manchester became like Renaissance Florence because his endeavour transformed the mindset of the inhabitants of this city. We hear



him boast that ‘suddenly Manchester became a centre of the universe’ as it was during the industrial revolution. On each occasion he links Manchester of the present with Manchester at its peak and with Europe. In a similar vein he introduces himself as ‘Anthony, Anthony of Padua’, in this way (even if only jokingly) linking himself to a long lineage of people who transformed European culture and worked for the common good rather than just to enrich themselves.

Other references to European culture are more subtle. Some concern the connection between Wilson’s projects and that of Situationism, which shares many similarities with punk. The central concept in Situationist vocabulary is that of a ‘situation’, namely creating an event, which would change the social circumstances. Wilson uses, even overuses, terms such as ‘experiment’, ‘event’, likening them to situations which produced social change, such as the Biblical Last Supper. One of the events in which Wilson himself participated was the previously mentioned Sex Pistols’ gig which gave him the idea of producing his own ‘situations’, which would transform not only music but social reality at large. Factory Records, Wilson’s record label was meant to be a ‘situation’ in such a sense, where primacy was given to the artists rather than the (capitalist) owner of the label, namely Wilson. Wilson did not even own Factory Records, because it acted as a cooperative of sorts, with artists and managers sharing profits or losses. The name was picked up by Wilson’s collaborator, Alan Erasmus, who explains:

I was driving down a road and there was a big sign saying ‘Factory For Sale’ standing out in neon. And I thought, Factory, that’s the name, because a factory was a place where people work and create things, and I thought to myself, these are workers who are also musicians and they’ll be creative. Factory was nothing to do with Andy Warhol because I didn’t know at the time that Warhol had this building in New York called the Factory. (quoted in Haslam 2015: 295)

In this passage Erasmus, consciously or not, evokes the idea of a future communist society, in which work and creativity are merged, and artists do not play any privileged role in society, because everybody works and is creative, as declared by Marx in *The German Ideology*, where he proclaims (in a somewhat country gentleman fashion) that the all-rounded individuals of a communist future will be ‘hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon’, without becoming professional hunters or fishermen (Marx and Engels 1947: 22). Erasmus’ words can also capture Kraftwerk’s approach to their music, who at the beginning of their

career eschewed the traditional idea of a star, promoting instead the concept of musicians as workers (Grönholm 2011).

Even if neither Erasmus nor Wilson were aware of Warhol's Factory, due to its name, function and the fact that it was organised on the site of a disused factory, the Manchester Factory brings association with the one from New York. Yet, there are also differences between these Factories which one notices when comparing Winterbottom's biopic with Warhol's biographies. Warhol studied commercial art and in his work embraced and exploited capitalist logic, according to which profit is the ultimate value of any given object, be it a pair of shoes or a painting. His approach was to make objects which, apart from being pleasing to the eye, will ultimately sell. His embracing of the techniques of reproduction, such as making multiple copies of the same portrait of a famous person or iconic American objects such as Campbell soup cans, led him to produce relatively cheaply artefacts which fetched a high price. Warhol also praised American capitalism for being democratic, at least at the level of consumption – for him the United States was a place where everybody was drinking Coca Cola, be it the country's President, a movie star or an industrial worker. It was thanks to this logic that Warhol's Factory was able to survive for a long time, benefiting not only its creator, but also many less commercially oriented and talented artists than him.

Wilson's approach to art, as presented in Winterbottom's film, is different from Warhol, as he attempts to recreate the Romantic aura of art, which, according to Walter Benjamin, was lost when art started to be reproduced mechanically. Wilson's yearning for unique art is reflected in producing Factory Records' most commercially successful single, New Order's *Blue Monday*. The single's original sleeve, created by Factory designers, Peter Saville and Brett Wickens, showed disrespect for the way records are normally produced, by not including basic information about the product, as if to deter 'ordinary' consumers from buying it and appealing only to 'Factory insiders'. Moreover, due to the use of die-cutting and specific colours (all features used to make the record unique, even if mass-produced), the production cost of the sleeve was so high that the single sold at a loss (Nice 2011: 207-8). The question arises whether the story of the record can be seen as an 'event' in the Situationist sense, namely an intentional disruption of capitalist logic, or an act of incompetence on the part of an entrepreneur. Whatever the interpretation, the ultimate result was a financial loss and a lack of capital to invest in new projects, which prevented Wilson from pursuing his larger goal of producing a sustained music business in the North of England. Another example, pointing to Wilson's attachment to art as something unique, referred to in the film, is buying for the Factory office

a 'designer' table for 30,000 GBP. Wilson's collaborators find this purchase outrageous, particularly in the context of their record label losing money. Again, one is left wondering whether Wilson's decision to have such a table was a reflection of his rejection of capitalist logic by insisting on living beautifully irrespective of one's actual financial position or embracing it, by giving the appearance of being much better off than he actually was. In this context it is worth mentioning that the way Wilson introduces himself by answering 'Tony Wilson' to the question about his job, can be seen as a sign of him fetishising the original piece of art with its specific aura.

The way Wilson manages bands, signed to the Factory label, like his approach to releasing records, also leaves the viewer wondering whether it reflects his desire to create 'situations', his romantic worshipping of the artistic process as something specific to a particular artist or his plain managerial incompetence. Take, for example the episode concerning the Buzzcocks going to Barbados with 200,000 GBP, spending it all on sex and drugs, and then demanding from Wilson that he pays (again) for the music which they produced there and which is not even finished. Watching the behaviour of the band one wonders whether they are merely taking advantage of the socialist paradise the artists which Wilson created or are conning a gullible millionaire, and indirectly the people who lent Wilson money to invest in his music empire.<sup>iv</sup> The excesses of the band are particularly extreme in the light of the fact that they happen during a period of rapid neoliberalisation of Britain, undertaken by Thatcher's government. This included tightening the screw on the working class in the UK by curbing the rights of trade unions, lowering the taxes of the rich (to stimulate business activities), as well as a drive towards financialisation of every aspect of social life, including art. For Thatcher, high quality art did not need to be subsidised by the state because, if it was good, it would fetch a good price on the market.

Wilson's creation of the Hacienda nightclub with Erasmus can also be seen through the lens of Situationism. Its predecessor was the 'Factory Club' run at the Russell Club in Hulme from 1978 to 1979. The Factory Club night then moved to Oozit's in Central Manchester in 1980, where the new night was called 'The Beach Club', after the Situationist slogan 'Beneath the Pavement – The Beach', which was sprayed on Paris walls amidst the barricades of 1968. On first impression it refers to the sand beneath the cobblestones which were used by students to throw at the police, but its real meaning relates to the Situationist 'conviction that the city streets, the expression of capital and consumption, could be rediscovered and subverted through a new praxis of aimlessness, allowing the discovering of new connections between

events and revealing unexpected histories' (Heathcote 2011). However, Factory managers were not content to run a club night at a venue that they did not own and so the Hacienda was open in May 1982. The idea to set up a relatively small, cabaret-style club nurturing minority tastes and new ideas was distinctly European. It was actually Rob Gretton, the manager of Joy Division, rather than Wilson, who came up with the name, being inspired by reading a copy of Christopher Gray's *Leaving the Twentieth Century*, given to him by Wilson. The original meaning of a 'hacienda' is a large homestead in a ranch or estate usually in places where colonial Spanish culture has had architectural influence such as in South America and Mexico. The reference to a 'hacienda' offered by Gretton gives the impression of a place that only exists in dreams. It was Wilson's and Gretton's intention to make such a place a reality, as if in defiance of common sense.

At one point in the film Wilson mentions that 'Being at the Hacienda was like being at the French Revolution.' These words, in common with other statements by Wilson, are double-edged. The French Revolution is both one of the most important events in European history, informed by progressive ideas of equality and solidarity, and a synonym of terror and mayhem, which dominated in its final stage and led to counter-revolution. Similarly, in the Hacienda one could be a part of the rave culture, forget one's individual identity and merge with the crowd, and become a victim of gang crime. Its closing down in 1992 with debts of 2,000,000, like everything which Wilson did, might be seen as proof that great initiatives do not always bring profit or, conversely, that being a successful entrepreneur is a condition of being a successful cultural worker.

The film finishes there, either because it effectively marks the end of Wilson's career or because it does not want to tarnish his reputation as a 'founding father' of Manchester's pop-rock music scene. But as much as showing that in Manchester we 'do things differently', it also demonstrates how difficult it is to establish a successful music business there. Equally, Wilson, as portrayed by Winterbottom, can be seen as an inspiration to a new generation of northern musicians and music entrepreneurs or a reason why they want to escape from there, usually to London.

## **Escaping the North**

*Control* concerns another famous Northerner, Ian Curtis, the leader of Joy Division (1976-1980), who came from Macclesfield where he spent most of his short life. Joy Division is

credited as being one of the first post-punk bands, in fact being concurrent with punk. They have in common with punk their DIY culture (their first record, *An Ideal for Living* being self-released in 1978), engaged, quasi-political lyrics and a preference for a traditional, standard song, as opposed to a long form, which was the case with symphonic rock. However, unlike typical punk bands, Joy Division did not look scruffy and their music was marked by drawing on a large palette of inspirations and musical experimentations.

*Control* was directed by Anton Corbijn (b. 1955), a Dutch director, who before making this film was a still photographer, renowned for photographing famous pop musicians, such as U2 and Depeche Mode for music weekly *NME* and making videos for various bands. He was also a photographer of Joy Division and, as Jonathan Romney asserts, 'was in no small part responsible for creating the defining image of Joy Division. His black-and-white photographs crystallised the Manchester band's mystique as poetic young outsiders struggling against the bleakness of existence in an industrial wasteland' (Romney 2007: 51).

Corbijn is interested in Curtis' identity as a Northerner to a much lesser extent than Winterbottom and more in (re)constructing his life as the story of a romantic artist, who was tormented, misunderstood and died prematurely. Curtis' life lends itself perfectly to such a narrative as he suffered from epilepsy and committed suicide at the young age of 23. Moreover, he was torn between two women: his wife and his lover. That said, there are many more factors in his success, such as collaboration with fellow band members, the work of music producers and managers, but they are played down by Corbijn, to emphasise Curtis' role.

Not being a native Northerner, and most likely feeling compelled to prove to the audience that he 'deserves' to make a film about a place and culture which he knows only second-hand, Corbijn put much effort into recreating it from the available representations such as his own photographs of Joy Division and most likely the photographs of Macclesfield from the period the film was made: the mid-1970s to early 1980s. While Winterbottom's film is made under the sign of postmodernism, Corbijn is faithful to a certain type of documentary realism; his film has the feel of animated photographs. The clearest sign of that is it being shot in black and white. A consequence is that *Control* also ultimately adheres to a stereotype of the North West as 'lacking in colour': a poor and grim place, from where people want to escape, although in reality Macclesfield, as with the whole of Cheshire, is rather affluent. Camerawork underscores this impression. The main image we get in the film is that of the street on which Ian and his wife live. It is always presented from the same perspective, in a long shot, so that we see two rows of terraces facing the hills. The street is almost empty with few cars or passers-by, giving the impression that nothing happens there; the town stands still. There is no reference

to the political situation in Britain at the time, despite the fact that the late 1970s were one of the most turbulent periods in the country's postwar history. Such representation contrasts with that offered by Winterbottom, who showed how Wilson tried to overcome the stereotype of 'Grimland' by his passion for what will be described today as 'cultural regeneration'. 'Grimland' is also how the characters in the film, especially Curtis, see their surroundings, as in an episode when Curtis, when asked by his future lover, Annik Honoré, who is Belgian, to tell her about Macclesfield, replies 'It is grey, it is miserable. I've wanted to escape it my whole life'.

Corbijn shows that music offered Curtis a metaphorical and then real escape from the North, but at the same time kept him there. After returning home from school the young Ian locks himself in his bedroom, full of posters of pop stars, listens to music and poses in front of the mirror. His favourite stars are David Bowie and Iggy Pop, both artists coming from the Anglo-American centre (the UK and the U.S.A respectively), but known for spending a part of their lives in Berlin and being inspired by European culture, even making Nazi style fashionable. The name Joy Division, referring to the brothels in concentration camps, as well as its previous name, Warsaw, was the result of Bowie's influence on its members (Reynolds 2005: 180-81). On this occasion, however, unlike as in the case of Wilson's manner of evoking all things European, the references functioned merely as free-wheeling signifiers. It is unlikely that before naming themselves Warsaw the young Northerners travelled to Warsaw or studied the history of this city.<sup>v</sup> If anything, such a name betrayed the band's provinciality, which they tried to overcome by evoking a place hidden behind the Iron Curtain. Joy Division's music in *Control* is rendered as reflecting the grim landscape of Macclesfield, rather than some far-away places. The mechanical rhythm of the songs and Curtis' robotic gestures give the impression of being trapped.

Curtis is also trapped in Macclesfield by his marriage. His wife Deborah (Debbie) comes across as tawdry, unsophisticated and passive. She agrees to become Curtis' wife and have a child with him without questioning his motives and without telling him what she expects from their future life. Corbijn tends to locate Debbie in domestic spaces, mostly in the kitchen and the bedroom. Often she nags Ian to return to bed, when he is immersed in artistic activity. This immediately brings to mind 'kitchen sink' films of the late 1950s, such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), directed by Karel Reisz, in which women were reduced to being vehicles or obstacles to male self-discovery, except that, paradoxically, the heroines of these earlier films were more adventurous than Curtis' wife, as depicted in *Control*. When Debbie ventures outside the house, for example attending a Joy Division gig, she does not fit in, as she

looks plain or is pregnant. On one occasion somebody forgets to put her on the guest list. When she eventually manages to get in, she becomes an embarrassment to Ian, who enjoys chatting with his fans, and wants to separate his life as a pop star from that of his domestic existence.

#### Figure 10.2

##### Ian Curtis in grey Macclesfield

When Ian discusses Debbie with his future lover, Annik Honoré, he describes Debbie as someone who ‘loves it in Macclesfield’. This is, however, not because Debbie feels great there, but because she has nothing to compare Macclesfield with, as she never travelled, either literally or metaphorically, by imagining herself as having a different life than the one she lives. Looking at Debbie one thinks about the description of the North and its people, as found in the northern literature: sincere, honest, loyal, yet lacking in subtlety and grace (Pocock 1979: 65-68). That northern women or even northern wives do not have to be represented this way, we can observe in *24 Hour Party People* where Lesley, Tony Wilson’s wife, is depicted as a woman who does not allow her husband to domesticate her. She refuses to have children with him, is always ready for partying and when she catches her husband with prostitutes performing fellatio on him, immediately takes revenge by having sex with his pal. Ultimately, Lesley is the one who leaves Tony, rather than other way round. Debbie is unable to take revenge on Ian or even confront his lover. When she finds Annik’s telephone number, she phones her, but puts down the receiver after hearing ‘bonjour’, most likely being put off by hearing a foreign language.

Debbie’s character stands in contrast with Annik. Rather than just coming from Europe, Annik in Corbijn’s film stands for Europe, in the same way Debbie represents the North of England. Unlike Debbie, who is ultimately a housewife with no intellectual interests, Annik is an independent woman, who works in the Belgian Embassy in London and as a music journalist in her spare time. She speaks foreign languages, travels extensively and is able to meet Ian in different countries during his tour. When Annik and Ian are together, she challenges him to explain the meanings of his work, which is something Debbie never does, being preoccupied with the mundane aspect of their lives. When Annik is with Ian, we hear music which comes from Europe, but is marked as cosmopolitan, such as *Autobahn* by Kraftwerk or *Warsaw* by David Bowie, which can be regarded as a sign that she understands Ian and exerts a civilizing influence on him. Ian’s inability to choose between his wife and his lover might be regarded as a reflection of his difficulty to choose an identity: whether to be a Northerner or a cosmopolitan

European. This makes *Control* a different film from *24 Hour Party People* where such a dilemma did not exist – for Wilson being a Northerner meant being European and bringing Europe to Manchester by creatively reworking objects and situations which originated on the continent.

While the difference between the North of England and Europe is accented in *Control*, the North-South divide does not play a greater role in it. The only moment when the author alludes to it is when Joy Division travel to London for a gig. We learn that it did not go well, few people came and Ian got sick during the trip. London on this occasion functions as a ‘hostile land’, unlike Europe, which is friendly. On the other hand, London is also a place where Annik works and the band is shown there picking her up on their way to Europe.

Many characters who featured in *24 Hour Party People* are included in *Control*, but play smaller roles than in Winterbottom’s film, not to undermine the portrayal of Curtis as a romantic artist. This also refers to Tony Wilson, who in Winterbottom’s film is presented as instrumental in ensuring Joy Division’s success. Here he is just one of the guys who gravitate towards Ian. At times Wilson is even ridiculed, as in an episode where he signs Joy Division to Factory Record with his own blood and faints, which leads to a comment that he is a ‘bit of a drama queen’. Likewise, we barely get a sense that Joy Division belonged to the northern music scene, although this was an important factor in their success. Neither Wilson’s Europhilia nor his London-scepticism are brought to the fore, except in the last part of the film, when he comforts Annik, rather than Debbie, despite Ian’s wife crying for help. Ultimately, Corbijn suggests that it is impossible to marry the two cultures, of Northern England and continental Europe, similarly as it is impossible to have a wife and a lover. One can only escape from the North to Europe or stay in the North.

### Conclusions

The two films discussed in the chapter point to the importance of Europe in the lives of two cultural workers from the North of England: Tony Wilson and Ian Curtis. Wilson, as represented in *24 Hour Party People* draws on European culture to inform his project of creating a music scene and industry in Manchester, independent from London and to regenerate the city. Winterbottom’s film, by using a postmodern style also moves away from the traditional representation of the North as a grim, postindustrial city, frozen in its past by showing it as colourful and constantly changing. Curtis, by contrast, is presented in *Control* as somebody who cannot reconcile his attachment to his northern roots with his desire to explore



the world. In Corbijn's film the North-South divide is played down to emphasise personal factors in the way Curtis' career developed and ended. The static, 'postcard' style of *Control* suggests that the North is a 'frozen land', which cannot be changed either by music or other forces.

The difference can be attributed to the fact that Corbijn's vision is that of an outsider, who felt compelled to prove his credentials to make a film about the North by meticulously recreating its image, while Winterbottom, as an insider, enjoyed more freedom to depart from its stereotype. Ultimately, Corbijn's film is *about* the North, while Winterbottom's film is also *for* the North, encouraging those who live there to transform their environment, rather than escape from it.

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<sup>i</sup> Actually Wilson was born in Salford at then moved with parents to Marple (Nolan 2010: 1-5), however in this essay I will operate a wider concept of Manchester, which encompasses Salford.

<sup>ii</sup> Linda Hutcheon argues that 'postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges' Hutcheon 1988: 3); hence irony is at the core of postmodern art.

<sup>iii</sup> Such approach can be detected in the Brexit referendum in June 2016, when the majority of people living in the North voted 'Leave'.

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<sup>iv</sup> The question of the source of Wilson's investment is conveniently left out of the film's narrative. We only learn that money was being transferred from the club to the record company and back. However, other people familiar with Wilson's businesses are less coy in this respect. In particular, Peter Hook of Joy Division and New Order, who had a stake in Wilson's businesses writes about the Hacienda: 'We once worked out that, from the time it opened in 1982 to when it closed in 1997, each punter through the door cost us £10. We wasted *that much* through bad management and sheer stupidity. As far as we were concerned it was history we were making, not money. But if I'm ever skint I'll walk around Manchester asking everyone to give me my tenner back' (Hook 2009: xii).

<sup>v</sup> Simon Reynolds discusses at some length Joy Division enchantment with Germany and Nazism, mentioning that Curtis' wedding featured a hymn sung to the tune of the German national anthem (Reynolds 2005: 183). This might be true, but it does not undermine the fact that his interest was second-hand, mediated, as Reynolds put it, by Curtis' glam heroes, Reed, Pop and Bowie (ibid.: 183) and limited to the Nazi imagery. He showed no desire to introduce Nazi ideas in his life. In this sense he was different from Wilson, who drew on European ideas.